

## ORGAN DONATION FROM A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE: TO PERPETUATE A CULTURE OF LIFE

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*The first of a series of articles written exclusively for "On the Beat."*



In His Encyclical letter, *Evangelium Vitae (On the Value and Inviolability of Human Life)*, His Holiness, Pope John Paul II speaks of society's fascination with a "culture of death." He calls on Catholics and people of good faith everywhere to move from that culture towards a celebration and reflection of the glory of God in a "culture of life."

When asked to share my thoughts on the importance of organ donation for this publication, it was *Evangelium Vitae* that immediately came to mind. In thinking about the glorious gift of life God has given each of us, it would seem that one of the greatest ways an individual can honor that gift is by making a conscious decision to be an organ donor - a decision that enables another's life to continue - and in a very real and tangible way promotes "a culture of life."

Organ donation is, as His Holiness has stated, "a genuine act of love." The commitment of one person to give the gift of life to another mirrors an essential foundation upon which

the teachings of Christ and the theology of our Church are based. As Saint John tells us, "For God so loved the world, that he gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him, should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). By knowingly choosing the donation of one's bodily organs, one is acting as Christ would act - giving life to humanity.

The Catholic Church views organ donation as an act of charity. *The Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, a set of principles that guide the healing mission of the Church, clearly explains the permissibility of organ donations. In *Directive No. 30*, we read "The transplantation of organs from living donors is morally permissible when such a donation will not sacrifice or seriously impair any essential bodily function and the anticipated benefit to the recipient is proportionate to the harm to the donor..." Similarly, *Directives No. 63-66*, treat organ donation as follows: *Directive No. 63*: "Catholic health care institutions should encourage and provide the means whereby those who wish to do so may arrange for the donation of their organs and bodily tissue, for ethically legitimate purposes, so that they may be used for donation and research after death." *Directive No. 64*: "Such organs should not be removed until it has been medically determined that the patient has died. In order to prevent any conflict of interest, the physician who determines death should not be a member of the transplant team."

The donation of organs in a morally acceptable manner, at the end of life, offers the gifts of health and life to those who are most vulnerable and who are at times without hope. It is one of the many pro life positions an individual can choose in order to foster a culture that values life in our world.

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As to what criteria constitute a "morally acceptable manner," it is essential that organ transplantation occur in the context of love and respect for the dignity of the human person. There are, of course, parameters in determining

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when and how organs should be donated. It is the Church's position that transplanted organs never be offered for sale. They are to be given as a gift of love. Any procedure that commercializes or considers organs as items for exchange or trade is morally unacceptable. The decision as to who should have priority in regards to organ transplantation *must* be based solely on medical factors and not on such considerations as age, sex, religion, social standing

or other similar standards.

In addition, it is of the utmost importance that informed consent by the donor and/or donor's legitimate representatives be had and that vital organs, those that occur singly in the body, are removed only after certain death (the complete and irreversible cessation of all brain activity) has occurred.

As Pope John Paul II observes in *Evangelium Vitae* "There is an everyday heroism, made up of gestures and sharing, big or small, which build up an authentic culture of life. A particularly praiseworthy example of such gestures is the donation of organs in a morally acceptable manner."

It is for the betterment of humanity, for the love of one's fellow human beings, that organ donation is undertaken. One of the most powerful ways for individuals to demonstrate love for their neighbor is by making an informed decision to be an organ donor.